

STUDY OVERVIEW

This study examined seven public high schools. Four were “high-impact” – that is, they produced unusually large growth among students who entered significantly behind. We compared these high-impact schools with three average-impact schools with similar demographics. By looking at both sets of schools, we hoped to find out what the high-impact schools do differently than the average-impact schools.

In order to find schools that were *high-impact*, we developed a set of criteria that a school needed to meet to be considered¹:

- It had to have greater-than-expected growth over three years;
- It had to have at least average performance on the state assessments in reading and/or math (While these schools did not have to be high-performing, they did have to be within the achievement average of the state);
- Its achievement gaps had to be smaller than the state average;
- It had to have a Promoting Power Index² at or above the state average; and
- It had to serve 60 percent or more low-income students. If that criterion was not met, the school enrollment had to be 50 percent or more non-White and at least 20 percent – but less than 60 percent – low-income.

Once these schools were selected, we chose three demographically similar schools that produce average growth.

Over the course of a year, we collected a good deal of data and material from both sets of schools, including schedules, student transcripts, assignments and the like. We subsequently surveyed administrators, teachers and students. Members of our “practice team” also conducted multi-day site visits, including extensive classroom observations, as well as student and teacher focus groups.

Upon analyzing the data, we found that high-impact schools have many characteristics in common with average-impact schools. But they also differ in significant ways. Each practice described may not be evident at every high-impact school or every average-impact school. But we found that high-impact schools shared a common range of practices, as did average-impact schools.

The schools that were identified as high-impact schools are Jack Britt High School, Fayetteville, NC; Los Altos High School, Hacienda Heights, CA; East Montgomery High School, Biscoe, NC; and Farmville Central High School, Farmville, NC. We hope that other schools will be able to learn from them. The schools identified as average-impact, although not named, were critical to this study, and the Education Trust is grateful for their participation. (For profiles of each school, see Appendix B, School Profiles.)

Following are our major findings, organized in five “spheres” that the Education Trust research tells us influence school practice.

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the selection criteria and process, please see the Methodology section of this report.

² The Promoting Power Index, developed by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, is used to approximate a school’s high school graduation rate. For more detail, see the Methodology section of this report.

Sphere 1: Culture

- Though both sets of schools serve many low-income students who arrive far behind other students, high-impact high schools are clearly focused on preparing students for life beyond high school—specifically, college and careers. By contrast, average-impact high schools are more focused on preparing students for graduation.
- In official policy documents, the clear focus in high-impact schools is on academics. Average-impact schools focus on rules.
- In high-impact high schools, teachers and administrators express consistent views about achievement-related school goals. In average-impact schools, there are administrators and teachers with very high expectations, but much less consistency in the school as a whole.
- In high-impact schools, teachers embrace external standards and assessments; in courses where such standards and assessments are unavailable, they create them. In average-impact schools, teachers simply tolerate these things.

Sphere 2: Academic Core

- High-impact schools have consistently higher expectations for all students, regardless of students' prior academic performance; and principals, teachers, and counselors take responsibility for helping students succeed.
- In high-impact schools, barriers to high-level course-taking are removed. Students are encouraged to take on academic challenges. In average-impact schools, there are hurdles to gain access to the most challenging courses.
- Assessment data is used by high-impact schools for future planning, such as improving curriculum or making teacher assignments. Average-impact schools tend to use data primarily to measure past student performance.

Sphere 3: Support

- In both high- and average-impact schools, students who arrive behind get extra instructional time in English and math. But high-impact schools provide help in a way that keeps students on track with college-preparatory requirements. Average-impact schools provide the extra help in a way that delays entry into grade-level courses, making it harder for students to complete college-prep requirements.
- In high-impact schools, administrators and teachers take responsibility for ensuring that struggling students get the additional help that they need. At high-impact schools, little is left to chance. Average-impact schools generally offer extra help to students, but make it optional.
- High-impact schools have in place early warning systems to identify students who need help before it's too late. Average-impact schools are more likely to provide remedial help after students have faltered.
- Counselors in all schools are involved in scheduling, but counselors in high-impact schools are considered members of the academic teams and are responsible for actively monitoring student

performance and for arranging help when needed. Counselors in average-impact schools are more likely to get involved with students through referrals.

- High-impact and average-impact schools both have partnerships with businesses and colleges, but high-impact schools use those partnerships to aid in student preparation for postsecondary opportunities, while average-impact schools tend to use their partnerships for dropout and drug-abuse prevention.

Sphere 4: Teachers

- High-impact schools use more criteria than teacher preference to make teaching assignments, looking at factors such as past student performance and the teacher's area of study. Teacher assignments are made to meet the needs of the students, rather than the desires of the teachers. In average-impact schools, teaching assignments are more likely to be determined by staff seniority and teacher preference.
- School-sponsored support for new teachers in high-impact schools is focused on instruction and curriculum. Average-impact schools provide support for new teachers, but it is more personal and social in nature.
- Administrators at high-impact high schools adjust class sizes to provide more attention for struggling students and are not averse to larger student-teacher ratios for students who are able to work more independently. Class sizes in average-impact schools are relatively uniform.
- Principals at high-impact high schools exert more control over who joins their staff than those at average-impact schools.

Sphere 5: Time and Other Resources

- High-impact schools are more deliberate about the use of instructional time, arranging available time to help "catch up" students who arrive behind.
- Students who enter ninth grade behind in high-impact schools spend more time in courses with substantial reading and/or reading instruction than do their counterparts in average-impact schools.
- Overall, the amount of time that students spend in "academic" classes is about the same in both high- and average-impact schools. But in high-impact schools, a larger fraction of that time is spent in grade-level or "college-prep" courses, while students in average-impact schools spend more time in "support" or "remedial" courses.
- All of the schools in the study say they protect academic time, but high-impact schools have more strategies to efficiently use time and are stricter about enforcement.
- For students in both high- and average- impact schools, the senior year has fewer academic challenges than any other year. The only exceptions to this finding are students in high-impact schools who enter ninth grade behind and proficient students in average-impact schools. These students spend a slightly higher percentage of time their senior year in academic courses than they do in their freshman year, but less than in their sophomore and junior years.

One final note. Just as this report does not describe the characteristics of low-performing schools, it also does not address the characteristics of **high-performing** schools – that is, schools at which students from all demographic groups are testing at proficient or advanced levels; where graduation rates are high for all students; and all students are challenged by a rigorous curriculum that prepares them for postsecondary options. Rather, the findings about these high-impact schools point to the necessary – but not nearly sufficient – steps schools can take toward higher performance.

